

Terahertz Quantum Cascade Lasers, Electronics, and Real-time Imaging

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Introduction

THz frequencies ($f = 0.3\text{-}10$ THz) remain one of the most underdeveloped frequency ranges, even though the potential applications in remote sensing and imaging, spectroscopy, and communications are great. This is mainly due to lack of coherent sources with high output power levels. The difficulty to generate THz radiation is because of the so-called "THz gap" in conventional semiconductor devices, which falls between two other frequency ranges in which solid-state sources have been well developed. One is the microwave and millimeter-wave frequency range, and the other is the near-infrared and optical frequency range. Semiconductor electronic devices that utilize oscillating conduction current \vec{J} (such as transistors, Gunn oscillators, Schottky-diode frequency multipliers, and photomixers) are limited by the transit time and parasitic RC time constants. Consequently, the power level of these electronic devices decreases rapidly as the frequency f increases above 1 THz. In contrast to the electronic devices, photonic or quantum electronic devices (such as laser diodes) generate radiation by oscillating bounded dipoles (which give rise to an oscillating displacement current $\frac{\partial \vec{p}}{\partial t}$). As a result, they are not limited by the transient time and/or the RC time constant. However, for conventional bi-polar laser diodes, they are limited to frequencies above that corresponds to the semiconductor energy gap, which is higher than 10 THz even for narrow-gap lead-salt materials. Thus, the frequency range below 10 THz is inaccessible for the conventional semiconductor bi-polar diode lasers.

Semiconductor quantum-effect devices (which can be loosely termed "artificial atoms"), including both vertically grown quantum-well structures and laterally confined mesoscopic devices, are human-made quantum mechanical systems in which the energy levels can be chosen by changing the sizes of the devices. Typically, the frequency corresponding to the intersubband transitions is in the millimeter-wave range ($\Delta E \sim 1\text{-}4$ meV) for the lateral quantum-effective devices, and THz to infrared for the vertical quantum wells. It is therefore appealing to develop ultrahigh-frequency devices, such as THz lasers utilizing the intersubband transitions in these devices.

In our group, we are systematically investigating physical and engineering issues that are relevant to devices operating from millimeter-wave to THz frequencies. Specifically, we are working on THz quantum cascade lasers based on intersubband transitions in quantum wells, their applications as local oscillators in heterodyne receivers, and real-time THz imaging using focal-plane array cameras.

Development of terahertz quantum cascade lasers

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Semiconductor quantum wells are human-made quantum mechanical systems in which the energy levels can be designed and engineered to be of any value. Consequently, unipolar lasers based on intersubband transitions (electrons that make lasing transitions between subband levels within the conduction band) were proposed for long-wavelength sources as early as the 1970s. However, because of the great challenge in epitaxial material growth and the unfavorable fast nonradiative relaxation rate, unipolar intersubband-transition lasers (also called quantum-cascade lasers) at mid-infrared wavelengths were developed only recently at Bell Laboratories. This achievement paved the way for development of coherent laser sources at customized frequencies ranging from THz to near-infrared. However, compared to the infrared QCLs, THz QCLs at much longer wavelengths face unique challenging issues. First, the energy levels corresponding to THz frequencies (1 THz = 4 meV) are quite narrow, so it is very challenging to design quantum well structures for selective injection to the upper level and selective depopulate electrons from the lower level. The requirements for fabrication of such quantum-well structures with adequate accuracies are also demanding. Because of the narrow separation between subband levels, heating and electron-electron scattering will have a much greater effect. Second, mode confinement, which is essential for any laser oscillation, is difficult at longer wavelengths. Conventional dielectric-waveguide confinement is not applicable because the evanescent field penetration, which is proportional to the wavelength and is on the order of several tens of microns, is much greater than the active gain medium of several microns. Recently (November 2002), we made a breakthrough in developing quantum-cascade lasers at 3.4 THz (corresponding to 87 μm wavelength). Since then, we have made rapid progress in developing many lasers with record performance, including but not limited to the highest pulsed operating temperature of ~ 170 K, highest CW operating temperature of 117 K, and the longest wavelength of 188 μm (corresponding to 1.6 THz). Key results are summarized in the following sections.

THz quantum cascade lasers based on resonant phonon scattering for depopulation

The direct use of LO-phonon scattering for depopulation of the lower state offers several distinctive advantages. First, when a collector state is separated from the lower state by at least the phonon energy $\hbar\omega_{LO}$, depopulation can be extremely fast, and it does not depend much on temperature or the electron distribution. Second, the large energy separation provides intrinsic protection against thermal backfilling of the lower radiative state. Both properties are important in allowing higher temperature operation of lasers at longer wavelengths.

The present design combines advantages of our two previously investigated THz emitters. As shown in Fig. 1, the radiative transition between levels 5 and 4 is spatially vertical, yielding a large oscillator strength. The depopulation is highly selective, as only the lower level 4 is at resonance with a level 3 in the adjacent well, where fast LO-phonon scattering takes place. The four-well structure inside the dashed box is one module of the structure, and 175 such modules are connected in series to form the quantum cascade laser.

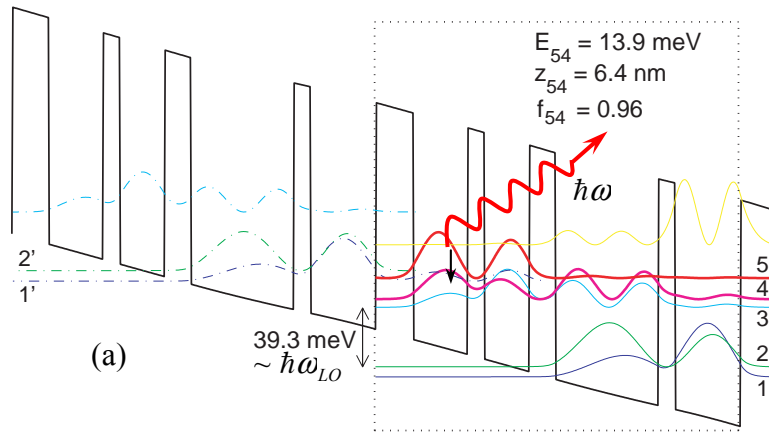


Figure 1. Conduction band profile calculated using a self-consistent Schrödinger and Poisson solver (80% conduction band offset) biased at 64 mV/module. Beginning with the injector barrier, the layer thickness in Å are **54/78/24/64/38/148/24/94**. The 148-Å well is doped with Si at $1.9 \times 10^{16}/\text{cm}^3$, yielding a sheet density of $2.8 \times 10^{10}/\text{cm}^2$.

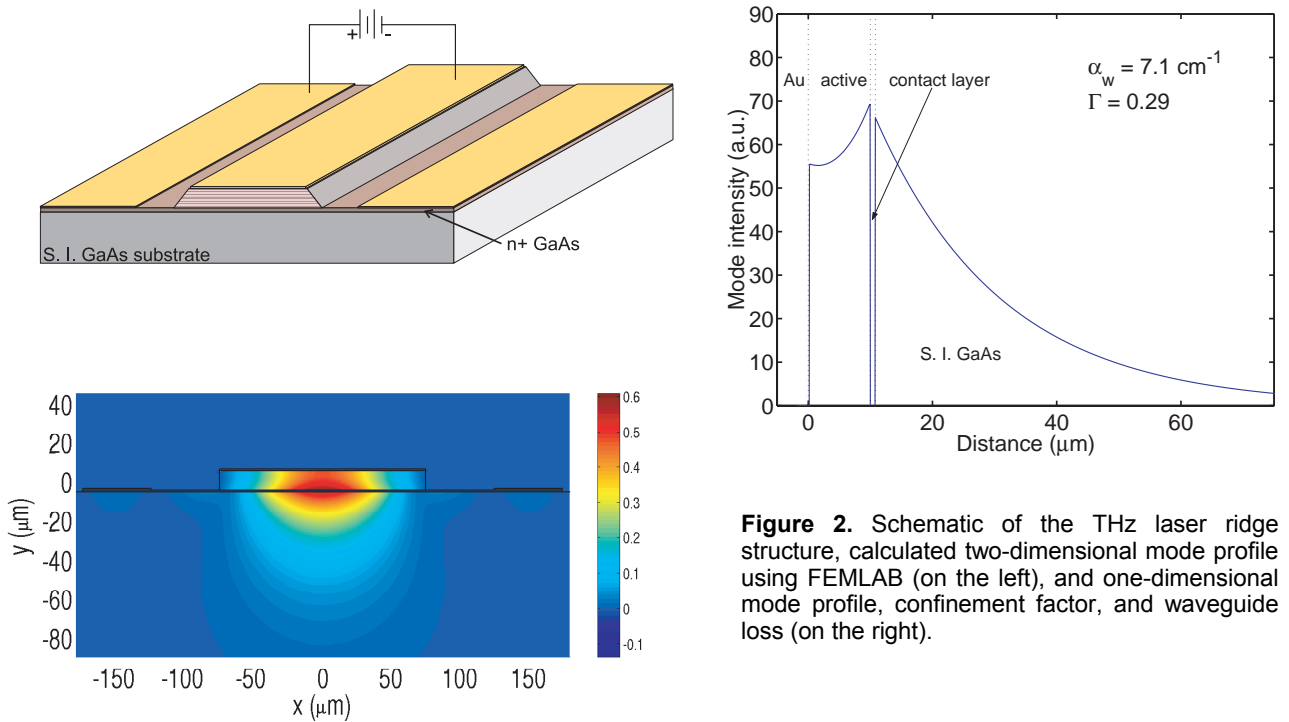


Figure 2. Schematic of the THz laser ridge structure, calculated two-dimensional mode profile using FEMLAB (on the left), and one-dimensional mode profile, confinement factor, and waveguide loss (on the right).

Mode confinement in this laser device was achieved using a surface plasmon layer grown under the active region. The schematic of the device structure and the calculated mode profile and waveguide loss are shown in Fig. 2. The calculated waveguide loss of 7.1 cm^{-1} and mode confinement factor $\Gamma \approx 29\%$ are quite favorable compared to the calculated gain of our laser device. After the rear facet was high-reflection (HR) coated, lasing was obtained in this device and a typical emission spectrum above threshold is shown in Fig. 3(a). The emission frequency corresponds to a photon energy of 14.2 meV,

close to the calculated value of 13.9 meV. Pulsed lasing operation is observed up to 87 K with a power level of 13 mW at 5 K, and ~4 mW even at liquid-nitrogen temperature of 78 K, as shown in Fig. 3(b).

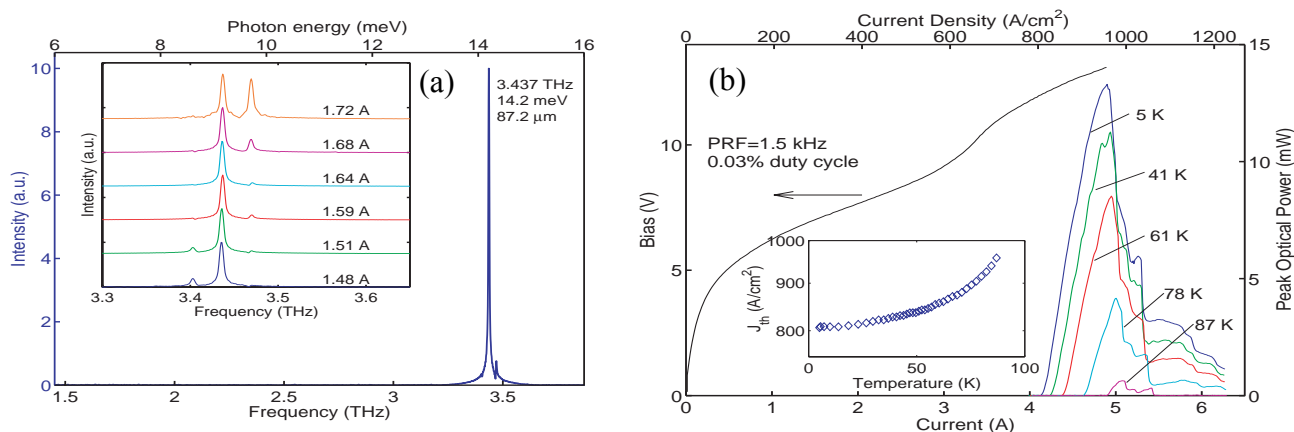


Figure 3. (a) Emission spectrum above threshold. The inset shows a set of emission spectra that are Stark-shifted to higher frequencies with higher bias. (b) Pulsed power-current relations taken from a similar laser device at different heat-sink temperatures.

THz quantum cascade lasers using metal waveguides for mode confinement

After our initial success in the development of 3.4-THz quantum cascade laser, one of the improvements made was the mode confinement. As shown in Fig. 2, the mode confinement using surface plasmon layer yields a relatively low mode confinement factor of $\Gamma \approx 0.29$. This mode confinement is sufficient for lasing at 3.4 THz. However, as we are developing even longer wavelength quantum cascade lasers, the mode confinement will become much worse or even unconfined at frequencies lower than 2 THz for the carrier concentration in our laser structures. An alternative method for mode confinement is to use metal waveguides. As shown in Fig. 4, the mode is now tightly confined between the top and bottom metal contacts, yielding a confinement factor close to 100%. Fig. 4 also shows the process of wafer bonding and selective etching to fabricate such a metal waveguide structure.

Using a combination of the metal-metal waveguides and improved gain medium, we have developed THz QCLs with many record performance in the last year. Some of the highlights of these achievements are summarized in Fig. 5, including the highest operating temperature of ~170 K in the pulsed mode (at this temperature $k_B T / \hbar \omega \approx 1.2$, which is unprecedented for any solid-state photonic devices), 117 K in CW mode, and the longest wavelength (188 μm , corresponding to 1.6 THz) QCL to date.

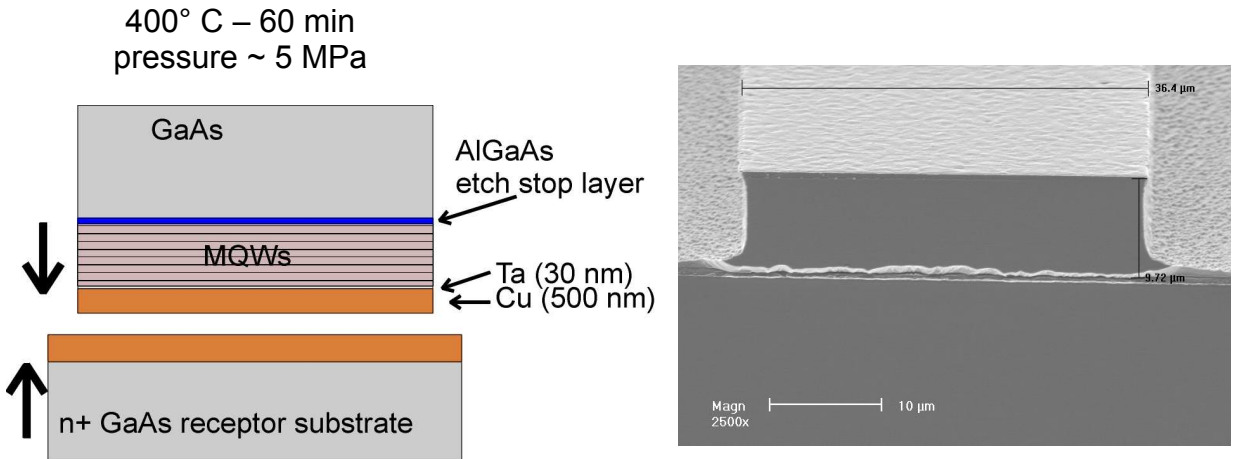


Figure 4. Left: Schematic of the wafer bonding process for double-side metal-metal waveguide. Right: A SEM picture of a fabricated device.

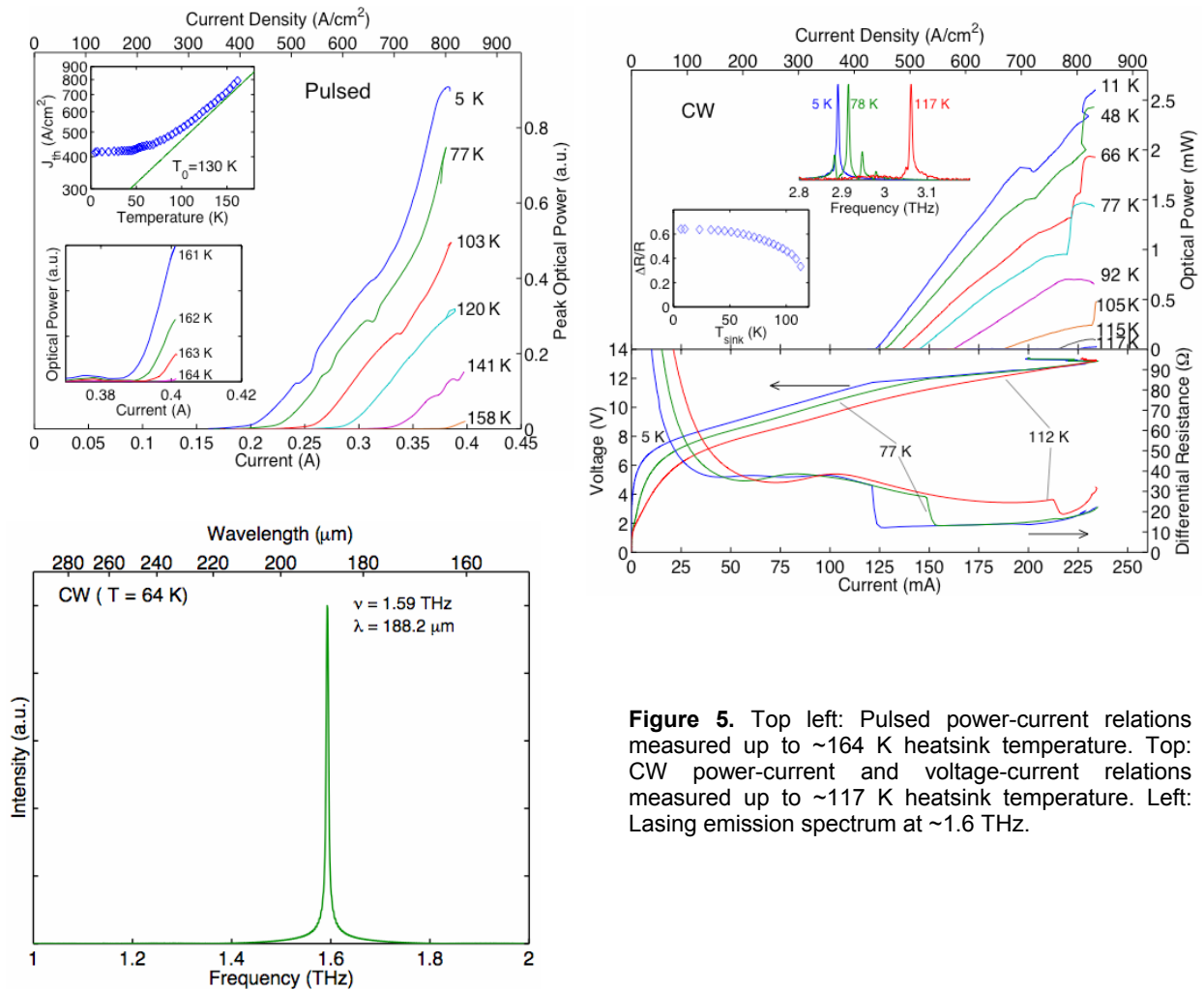


Figure 5. Top left: Pulsed power-current relations measured up to ~164 K heatsink temperature. Top: CW power-current and voltage-current relations measured up to ~117 K heatsink temperature. Left: Lasing emission spectrum at ~1.6 THz.

In addition to the record performance in operating temperatures and wavelength, we have recently developed high-power THz quantum-cascade lasers that produce ~250 mW of power, as shown in Fig. 6. Using these high-power lasers, we are now able to perform THz imaging in real time at a video rate of ~20 frames/second, that is, making movies in T-rays.

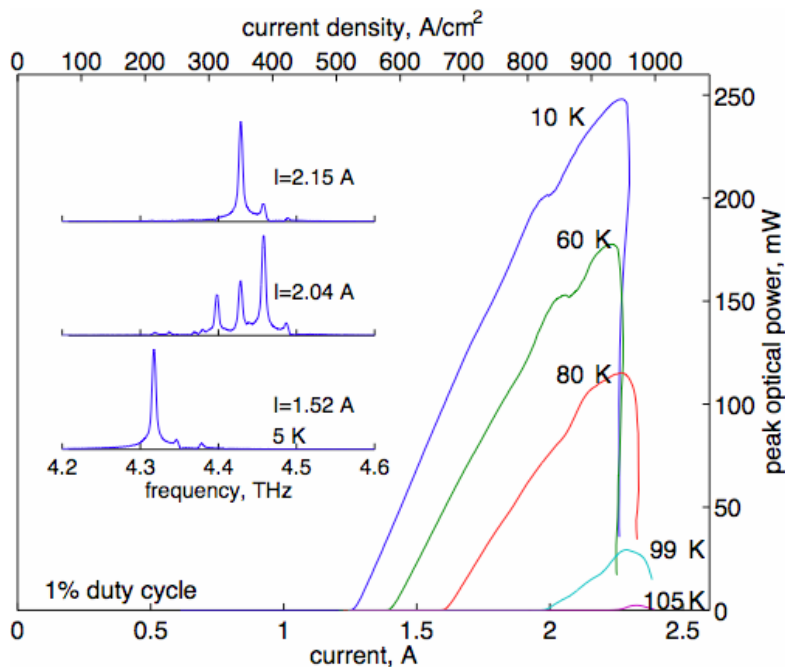


Figure 6. A 4.4-THz quantum-cascade laser with peak power level of ~250 mW.

Analysis of transport properties of THz quantum cascade lasers

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Even though mid-infrared and THz quantum cascade lasers operate on the same principle, that is, intersubband transition in semiconductor heterostructures, they show a qualitative difference in the dynamics of electron transport. For mid-infrared QCLs, the subband separations exceed the LO-phonon energy $\hbar\omega_{LO}$ and electron transport is dominated by LO-phonon scattering. For THz QCLs, many subband separations are smaller than $\hbar\omega_{LO}$, only the high-energy tail of a hot electron

distribution is subject to the LO-phonon scattering, which results in a significantly higher temperature sensitivity for the electron transport and a far greater importance of electron-electron (e-e) scattering. The long delay in the development of THz QCLs is testimony to the difficulty of achieving population inversion involving these complicated transport mechanisms. It is thus important to quantitatively model these transport processes to extend the operation of THz QCLs to broader frequency ranges and higher temperatures.

Our transport analysis is based on Monte Carlo (MC) simulations, which have been used to analyze and design mid-infrared and THz QCLs. Compared to conventional rate-equation analysis, the MC method is especially useful for THz QCLs, as it does not rely on a specific model for carrier distributions and can easily handle temperature- and density-dependent scattering times. Fig. 7 illustrates the flow chart of our Monte Carlo simulation scheme. It follows a conventional scheme for an ensemble of particles, in our case 10^4 particles, with a focus on e-e and e-phonon interactions involving the electrons in one module of the device under study. An electron that scatters out of a module is reinjected with identical in-plane k -vector into a subband equivalent to its destination subband, in accordance with the spatial periodicity of QCLs.

The results of the Monte Carlo simulations, focused on the 3.4-THz laser structure shown in Fig. 1, are summarized in Fig. 8. All simulations assumed a lattice temperature of 25 K, corresponding to a 10 K heat sink temperature. In Fig. 8(a), the calculated I-V relation qualitatively resembles that of measured one, with the calculated peak current density is noticeable lower without including electron-impurity scattering. With the inclusion of electron-impurity scattering, the agreement is much better. The two horizontal lines are calculated total cavity losses with one facet Au coated and without any facet coating. Our device lased only with one facet coating, thus the two lines define the range of material gain in our laser device. The qualitative agreement between the MC and experimental results indicate the usefulness of MC simulation as a design tool.

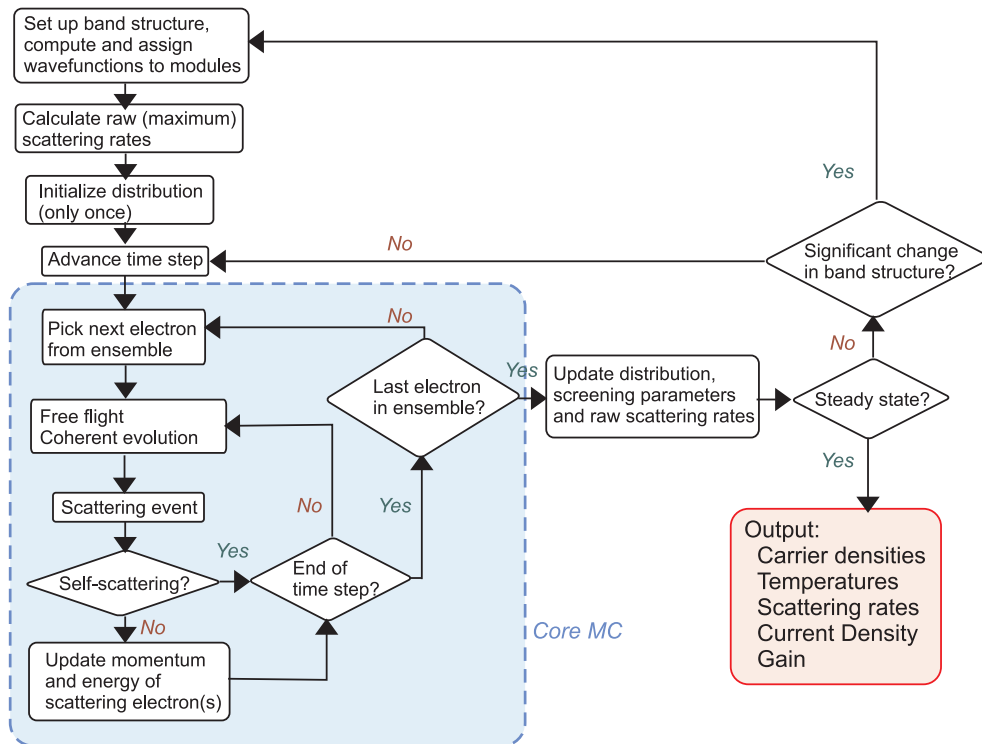


Figure 7. Flow chart of our ensemble Monte Carlo simulation scheme.

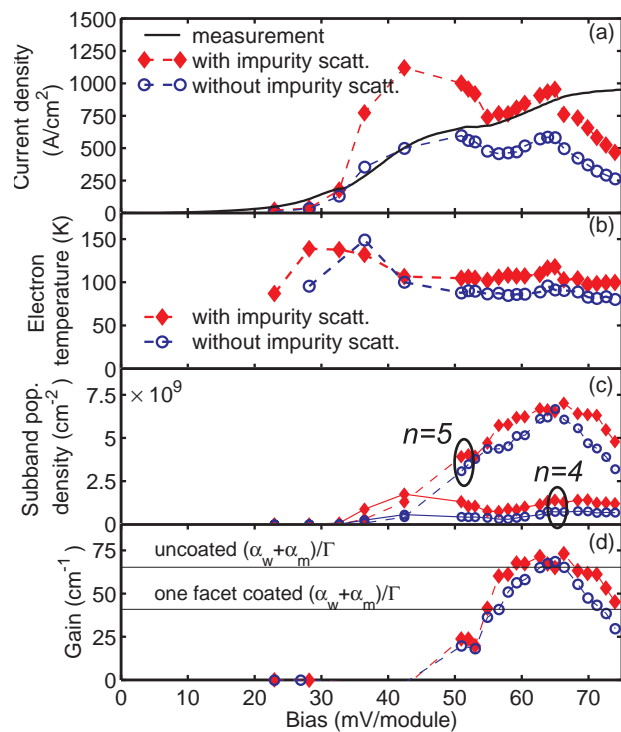


Figure 8. In (a)-(d), circle symbols are the results calculated without including electron-impurity scattering and diamond symbols are the results with electron-impurity scattering.

(a) Current density for a range of biases. The injection anticrossing occurs at 65 mV/module. The measured current is represented as a full line.

(b) Electron temperature T_e for the subbands involved in the radiative transition, $n = 4$ and $n = 5$.

(c) The population density in $n = 4$ and $n = 5$.

(d) Material gain for different biases. Also indicated are the calculated threshold gain values for a $1180 \times 150 \mu\text{m}^2$ ridge structure, with uncoated facets and with one facet HR coated.

Despite the reasonably good agreement shown in Fig. 8, however, a challenging problem remains in our transport analysis in how to deal with wavefunction localization caused by dephasing scattering. In all the MC studies on transport properties in QCL structures, the entire multiple quantum-well structure is treated as a single quantum mechanical system, for which Schrödinger's equation is solved to yield spatially extended subband states. In general, coherent interaction and time evolution is ignored, and transport is modeled as intersubband scattering among these spatially extended states, in a way similar to the Boltzmann transport equation. In this Boltzmann-like picture, potential barriers do not cause any bottlenecks in the transport process. For example, a thicker injection barrier only yields a smaller anticrossing gap, and thus will not affect the peak current density at resonance but will only makes the resonance sharper. In this picture, both the injection to the upper radiative level and removal of electrons from the lower radiative level tend to be quite efficient at resonance. As a result, our transport analysis based on this Boltzmann-like model predicted appreciable levels of gain in most of the structures that we have experimentally investigated for THz lasing. In real devices, however, dephasing scattering (due to interface roughness, alloy, and impurity scatterings) interrupts the coherent interactions between states and effectively localizes wavefunctions, making transport between weakly coupled states (characterized by a small anticrossing gap between these states) mostly an incoherent tunneling process. This incoherent sequential tunneling process is much less efficient than the injection and removal rates predicted by the Boltzmann-like model. A possible solution to deal with the problem of wavefunction localization is to start from a tight-binding model in a density-matrix formalism. In this model, the dephasing scattering damps the Rabi oscillation between two states across an energy barrier and therefore it comes in naturally in the reduction of the coupling/transport among spatially localized basis states. Another possible approach is based on a nonequilibrium Green's function theory, although not as intuitive as the MC approach, it takes all the dephasing processes into account and calculates important parameters such as the gain and current density. Both tasks are presently under our current investigations. Fig. 9 illustrates the flow chart of nonequilibrium Green's function analysis of our THz QCL devices. This simulation analysis is highly computation intensive and the required memory scales with n^4 , where n is the number of subband levels involved in

the transportation process ($n = 5$ for the structure shown in Fig. 1). Nevertheless, it has yielded results far better than those from semiclassical Boltzmann approach when compared with experimental results.

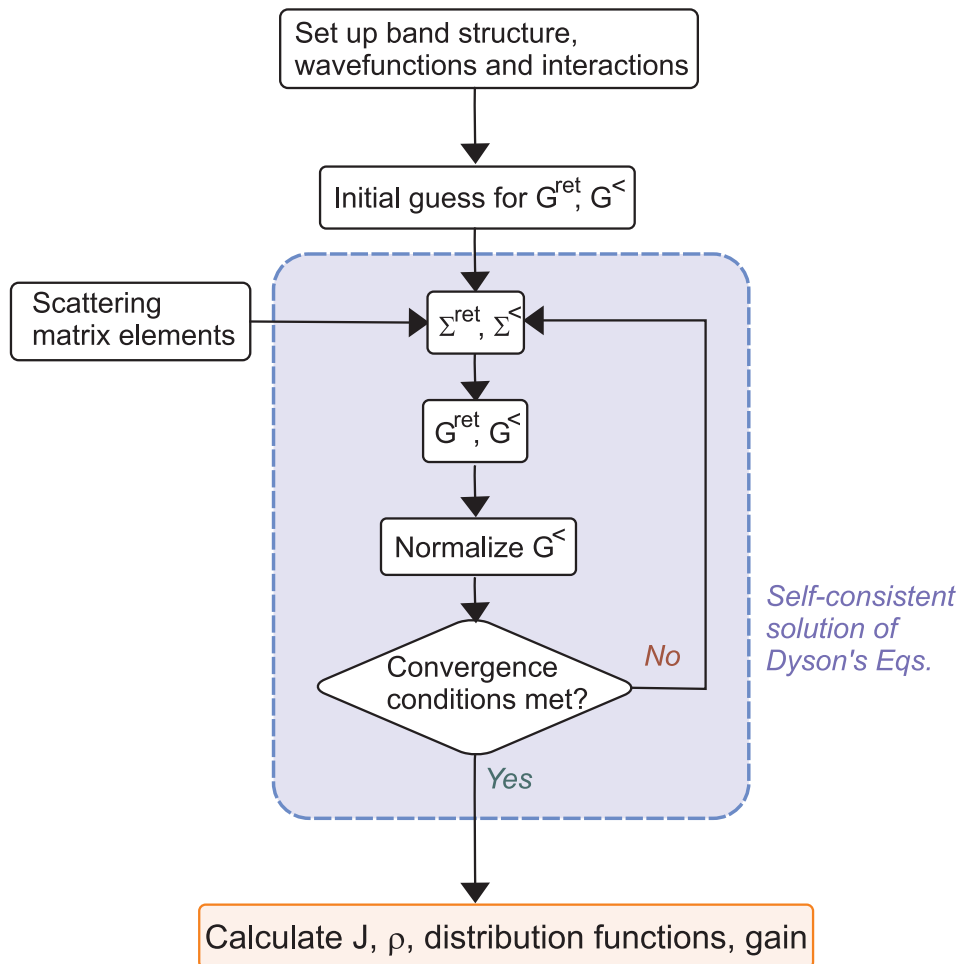


Figure 9. Flow chart of transport analysis using nonequilibrium Green's function approach.

Investigation of THz quantum-cascade lasers using microprobe photoluminescence

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In this work we performed measurements of the electronic and lattice temperatures and the relative subband populations in resonant-phonon THz QCLs. The method used is microprobe photoluminescence (PL), with the schematic shown in Fig. 8. The importance of this information stems from the existence of non-equilibrium electronic distributions, characterized by temperatures higher than the lattice ones at injected currents close to the laser threshold. These hot electrons arise from the detailed balance between the injection rates and the main energy relaxation rates, i.e. inter- and intra-subband electron-electron, electron-LO phonon, electron-impurity, and interface roughness scattering. In THz QCLs, the photon energy is smaller than the longitudinal-optical (LO) phonon energy E_{LO} (36.6 meV in GaAs) and the electron-LO phonon scattering between radiative subbands is energetically forbidden at very low electronic temperatures (T_e). However, the strong T_e dependence of the nonradiative relaxation rate $\tau_{5 \rightarrow 4}^{-1} \propto \exp[(E - E_{LO})/k_B T_e]$ significantly reduces the gain and increases the threshold current density at high T_e . We show that optimizing the quantum design may improve the electron-lattice coupling and hence the electrical and optical performance of THz QCLs.

Figure 10 shows the schematic of the measurement set-up, along with the band profiles and I-V curve of a THz QCL device. Figure 11 shows a set of PL spectra for different values of the electrical power (P). The rich features in the spectra correspond to radiative transitions between different conduction and valence subbands, as indicated in the figure. From the areas of those peaks, subband population can be inferred; and from the slope of the spectra on the higher-energy side, the electron temperature of the involved subband can be deduced. These are important parameters for us to gain understanding of transport properties of the THz QCLs, in order to further optimize their performance. The results of electron temperatures and populations of the two radiative subbands (level 5 is the upper subband and level 4 is the lower one) are shown in Fig. 9. As expected, the electron temperature is substantially higher than the lattice temperature. Furthermore, the ratio of population n_5/n_4 shows a plateau in the bias region where the device lases, as required by the gain clamping for steady-state operations.

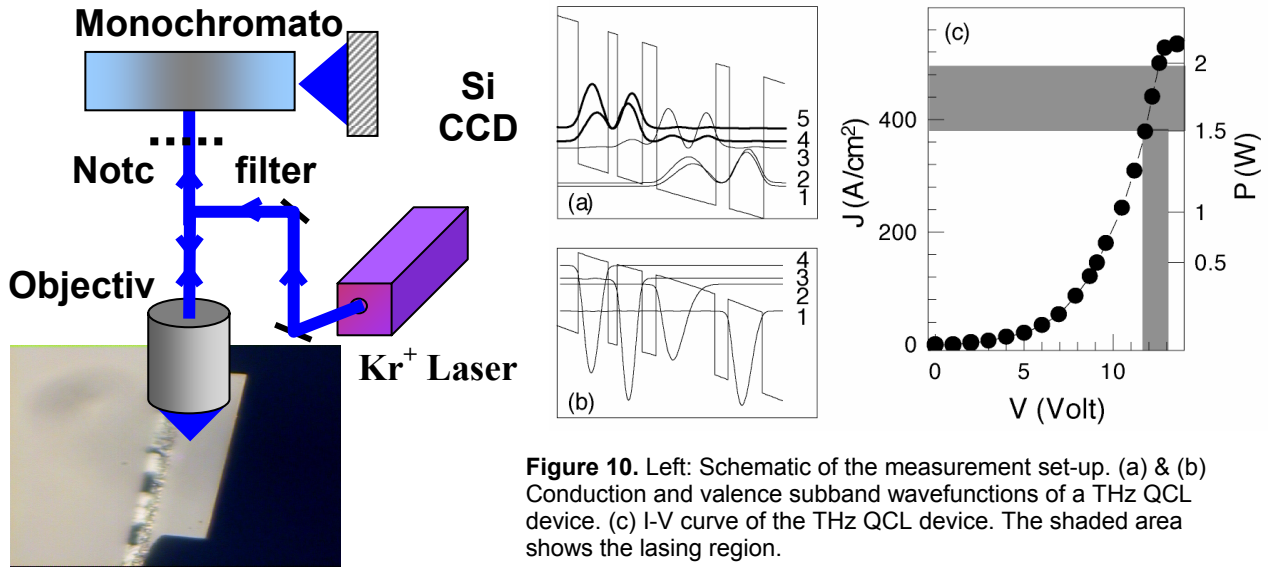


Figure 10. Left: Schematic of the measurement set-up. (a) & (b) Conduction and valence subband wavefunctions of a THz QCL device. (c) I-V curve of the THz QCL device. The shaded area shows the lasing region.

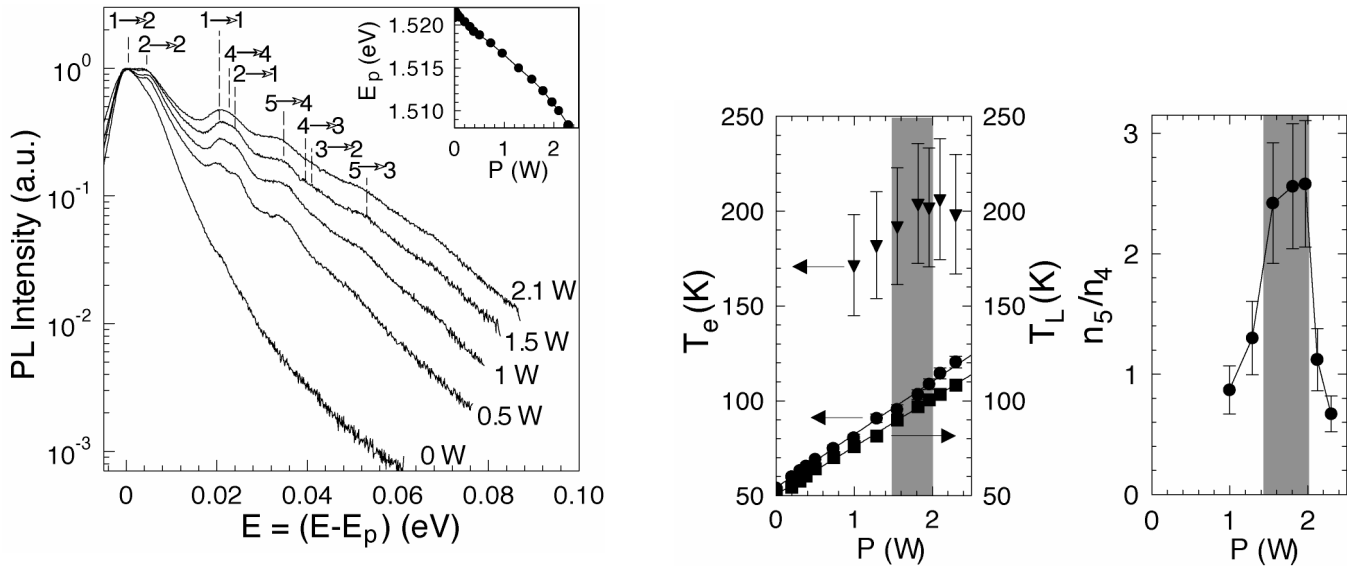


Figure 11. Left: Representative PL spectra at different electrical bias power of a THz QCL device. Center: Electron temperature of subbands 5 and 4, and lattice temperature as functions of the bias power. Right: Ratio of n_5/n_4 as a function of the bias power. It shows a clear evidence of gain clamping.

Terahertz heterodyne receiver using QCLs and hot-electron bolometers

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The terahertz (THz) region of the electromagnetic spectrum (300 GHz – 10 THz) is the least explored spectral region in astronomy, despite the fact that it contains half the luminosity and 98% of the photons of the universe. This is mainly caused by the absence of sensitive detectors and the fact that the earth's atmosphere is opaque for large fractions of this spectral region. Ground, air and space based observatories are now starting to lift the veil but they are limited by the current state-of-the-art radiation detectors. In particular, there are no spectrometers capable of performing very high-resolution spectroscopy above 2 THz suitable for space-based observatories. Here we report the first demonstration of an *all* solid-state heterodyne receiver that can be used as such a spectrometer at frequencies above 2 THz. The system we present uses a hot electron bolometer as mixer and a quantum cascade laser as the local oscillator, operating at 2.8 THz, with an unprecedented combination of sensitivity and stability. The complete system provides a unique solution for THz spectroscopy for astronomy as well as Earth science.

Figure 12 shows a schematic view of the experimental setup with the QCL and the HEB mounted in two separate dewars. A wideband spiral antenna coupled NbN HEB mixer is used with a superconducting bridge of 4 μm wide, 0.4 μm long, and about 4 nm thick. The normal state resistance R_N of the device, measured above the critical temperature of about 9 K, is 65 Ω . Without radiation applied a critical current I_c of 320 μA is observed at 4.2 K. The radiation is coupled to the antenna using a standard quasi-optical technique: the Si chip with the HEB is glued to the back of an elliptical, anti-reflection coated Si lens. The lens is placed in a metal mixer block thermally anchored to the 4.2 K cold plate. The divergent beam from the QCL passes through a high-density polyethylene (HDPE) dewar-window and is collimated with a parabolic mirror. The radiation is further guided to the HEB dewar through a flat mirror and a 6 μm thick Mylar beam splitter, which acts as a directional coupler. A blackbody source (of Eccosorb) is used as the signal source, which defines a hot load at 295 K and a cold load at 77 K. The signal is combined with the QCL beam through the beam splitter. Both signals pass through the thin HDPE window and a metal mesh heat filter at 77 K of the HEB dewar. The IF signal, resulting from the mixing of the LO and the hot/cold load signal, is amplified using a low noise amplifier operated at 4.2 K, and is further fed to a room temperature amplifier and filtered at 1.4 GHz in a band of 80 MHz.

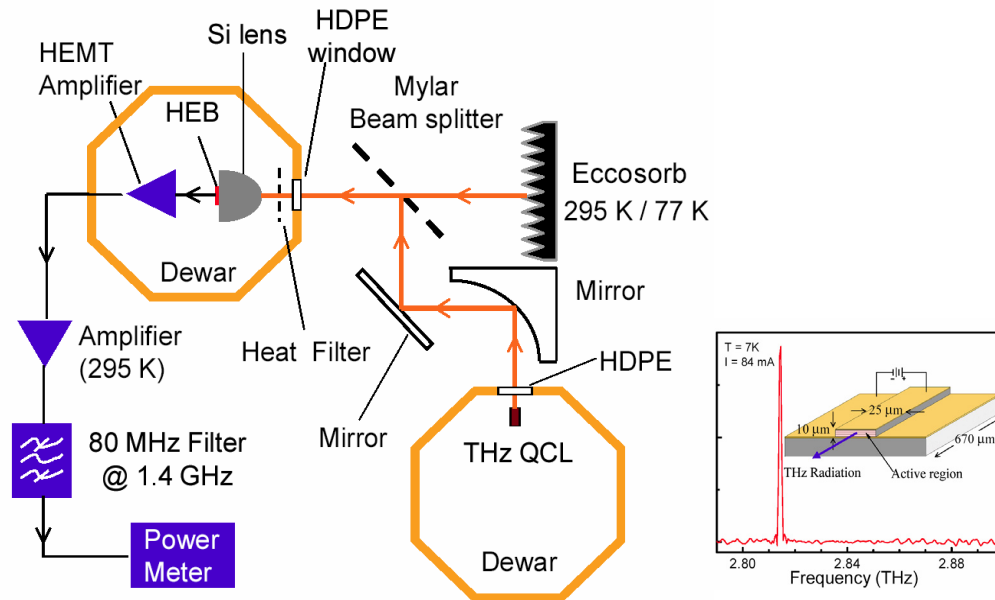


Figure 12. Schematic of the heterodyne receiver measurement set-up.

The key result of this work is demonstrated in Figure 13. A set of current versus voltage (I - V) curves of the HEB is shown for various levels (270, 300, 330 nW) of the effective power of radiation absorbed at the HEB, together with the receiver noise temperature, $T_{N, rec}$, as a function of voltage. (The inset shows a top view of the HEB with its spiral antenna). The power is varied by changing the DC current of the QCL, and the level is estimated by evaluating the absorbed power by the HEB through the isothermal technique. The noise temperature $T_{N, rec}$ is determined from the ratio of the IF output noise power for a hot and a cold load. Each set of $T_{N, rec}$ - V data shows a minimum region, indicating the optimum bias point. Best results are obtained for 300 nW LO power and 0.7 mV DC bias with $T_{N, rec}$ being as low as 1400 K, which is among the lowest obtained at this high frequency. This work, along with the phase-locking measurement described in the next section, has firmly established QCL's suitability in local-oscillator applications in a frequency range where no solid-state sources are available prior to our work.

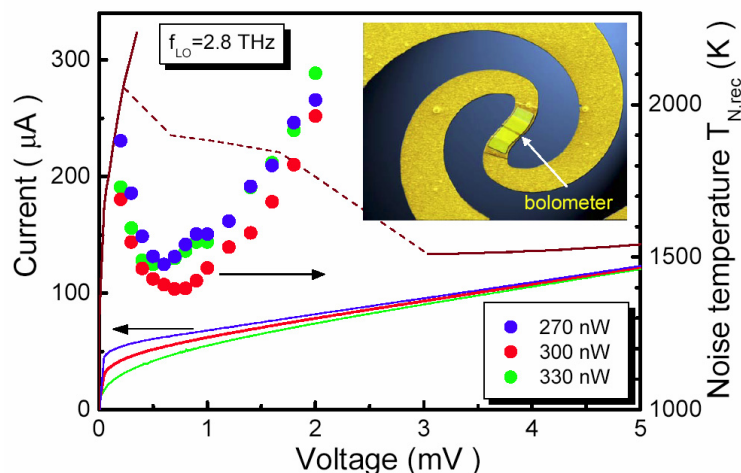


Figure 13. Current-voltage characteristics (solid line, left axis) of a NbN hot-electron bolometer (HEB) without and with radiation from a QCL at 2.814 THz. The measured receiver noise temperature $T_{N,rec}$ is shown as symbols (right axis) versus the bias voltage at different LO power levels. The inset shows a top view of the HEB with its spiral antenna.

Frequency and phase-lock control of THz quantum-cascade lasers

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In this work, we have locked the frequency of a 3-THz quantum cascade laser (QCL) to that of a far-infrared gas laser with a tunable microwave offset frequency. The locked QCL lineshape is essentially Gaussian, with linewidths of 65 kHz and 141 kHz at the -3 dB and -10 dB levels, respectively. The lock condition can be maintained indefinitely, without requiring either temperature or bias current regulation of the QCL. The result demonstrates that a terahertz QCL can be frequency controlled with 1 part in 10^8 accuracy, which is a factor of 100 better than that needed for a local oscillator in a heterodyne receiver for atmospheric and astronomical spectroscopy.

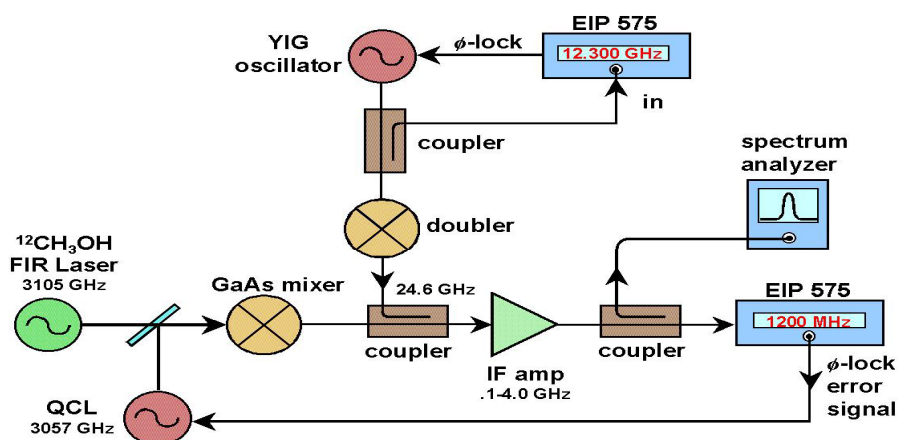


Figure 14. Diagram of Experimental Apparatus. The 24.6 GHz signal is injected into the coaxial IF port of the Schottky mixer by using a directional coupler backwards.

Figure 14 shows a schematic of the experimental apparatus. The outputs of the QCL and the FIR laser are combined by a wire grid polarizer and focused onto a room-temperature GaAs-Schottky-diode mixer in a corner reflector mount. The FIR line is the 3105.9368 GHz transition of methanol. Also incident on the mixer through its coaxial IF port is a 24.6 GHz signal that is produced by frequency doubling the output of a phase-locked YIG oscillator. The mixer generates a large number of sum and difference frequency terms from these inputs. The response of the diode is fast enough that sum frequency terms exceeding 6 GHz are produced, but for this experiment we are only interested in one 4th-order difference term that is the product of 4 AC electric fields.

Figure 15a shows the phase-locked IF signal centered at 1200.000 MHz. The lineshape is essentially Gaussian. Figure 13b provides a closer view at line center, with a -3 dB bandwidth of 65 kHz and a -10 dB bandwidth of 141 kHz. This exact spectrum can be maintained indefinitely if the FIR laser cavity is re-peaked manually every 15 minutes.

In this work we have demonstrated that a THz QCL can be controlled with conventional phase-lock techniques to have a long-term linewidth of 65 kHz and a frequency accuracy limited only by that of the reference oscillator, in this case a free-running FIR gas laser. This stability is already more than adequate for LO applications in remote sensing. In the near future it should be possible to lock the QCL to a harmonic of a microwave source which is itself referenced to a GPS-disciplined crystal oscillator. Such an arrangement would allow the QCL frequency to be controlled with 1 part in 10^{11} absolute accuracy. Currently, the 10 kHz loop bandwidth is a factor of 3×10^{-9} of the QCL operating frequency. This factor is small for oscillator stabilization by conventional microwave standards, and so it is not surprising that we see occasional excursions of the phase error that exceed $\pm\pi$. By modifying the EIP 575 circuitry, we should be able to extend the loop bandwidth to 1 MHz and thereby achieve substantial additional narrowing of the QCL linewidth and perhaps approach the Schawlow-Townes linewidth of a few kHz.

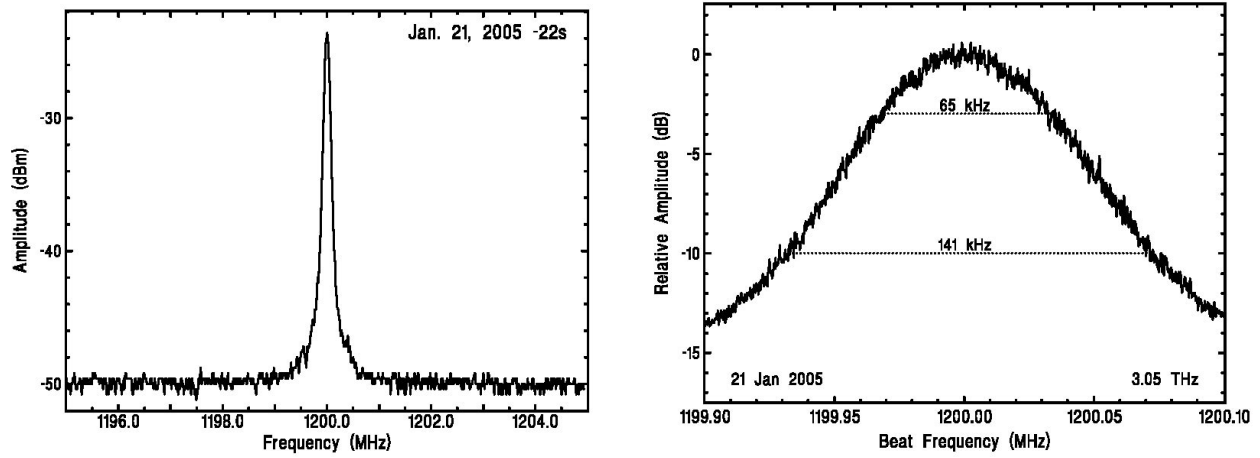


Figure 15. IF signal at 1200 MHz under locked conditions: (a) The frequency resolution of the spectrum analyzer is 100 kHz, and the post-detection video filter is on; (b) The plot shows a magnified view at line center with frequency resolution of 1 kHz, video filter on, and a scan time of 1 minute.

Beam pattern measurements and analysis based on an antenna model of wire lasers

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Because of the subwavelength dimension of the cross section of our metal-metal waveguides at THz frequencies, a large fraction of the mode propagate outside of the lasing gain medium. As a result, the measured far-field beam pattern is quite different from what would be expected based on the field at the aperture. The results from two lasers with different lengths are shown in Fig. 16. They both show ring-like interference patterns along the laser axis with the longer laser showing a denser interference fringes. This result was somewhat surprising as we initially expected an end-fire type of beam pattern from an aperture with subwavelength dimensions.

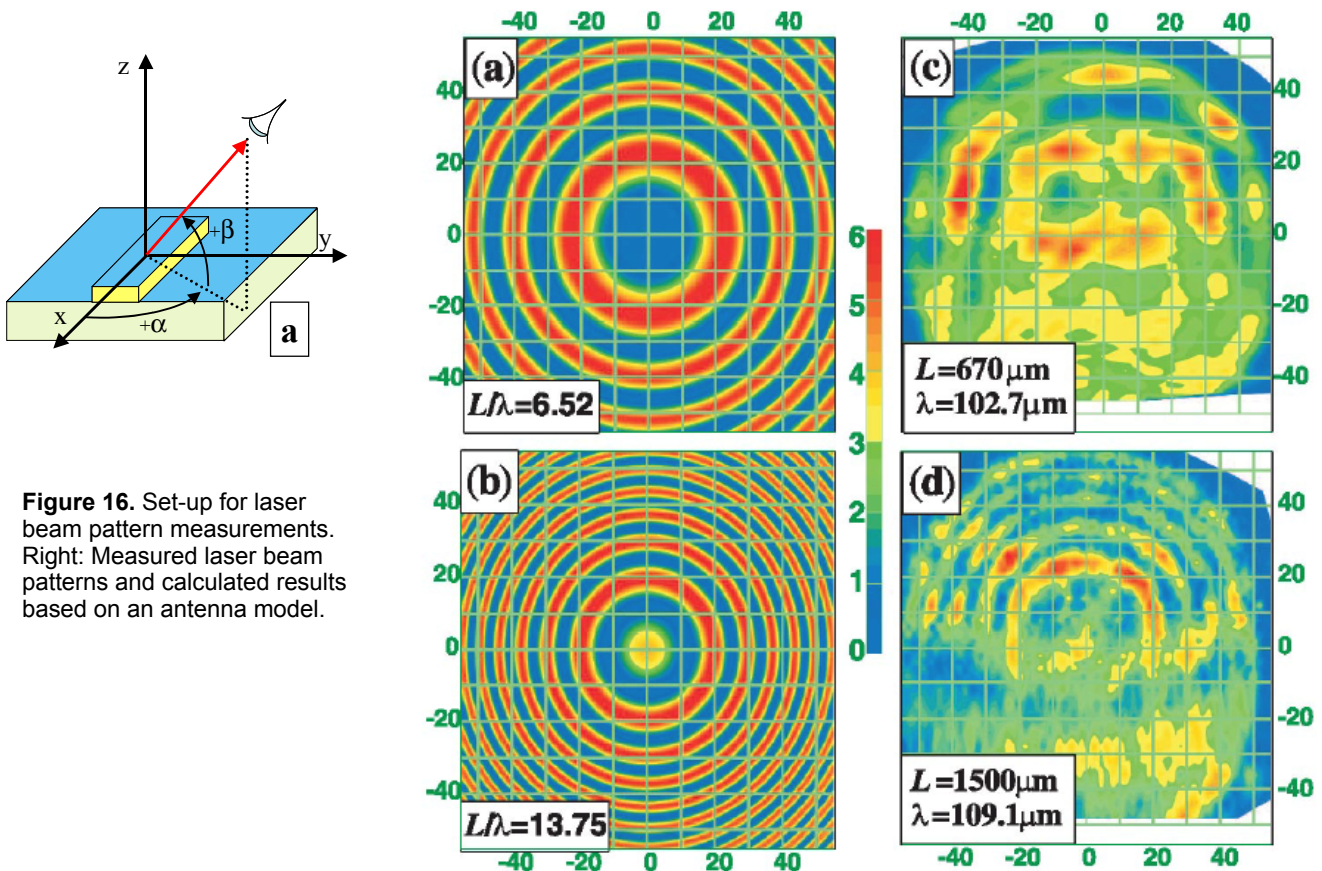


Figure 16. Set-up for laser beam pattern measurements. Right: Measured laser beam patterns and calculated results based on an antenna model.

As it turns out, because of the large fraction of mode propagating outside of the laser ridge, conventional diffraction theory based on Huygens' principle is no longer valid if one only considers the field at the aperture as the source. All the field inside and outside of the laser ridge must be taken into account in calculating the far-field pattern of the laser beam. Essentially, now the laser ridge acts as a continuously distributed phased antenna array. As a result, the length of the laser ridge, as well as the cross section dimensions, plays a major role in the laser beam pattern, as shown in Fig. 16. This unexpected result has some important consequences. For example, the angle of the main lobe scales with $1/L^{1/2}$, where L is the length of the laser structure. As a result, the laser beam can be "focused" much tighter than predicted from conventional diffraction theory, if a long laser device is used.

Real-time terahertz imaging using a microbolometer focal-plane array camera

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Imaging using radiation in the terahertz frequency range, 0.3 THz to 10 THz, has demonstrated the ability to see the details within visibly opaque objects such as: integrated circuits packages, leaves, teeth, thin tissue samples, and illicit drugs in envelopes. The vast majority of THz imaging has been done by linearly scanning an object through a tightly focused THz beam – a practice which limits the acquisition time to the mechanical scan rate of the system. With upper limits of 100's of pixels/second for mechanical scanning, a complete image takes minutes to acquire.

Real-time imaging (30 frames per second or more) has previously been demonstrated by using an electro-optic crystal for frequency upconversion so that THz images can be viewed with a CCD focal-plane camera. However, this setup requires precise timing of the optical and THz pulses, necessitating a scanning delay mechanism, adding to its complexity. Furthermore, because of the short THz pulses (<1 ps), this scheme is inherently broadband (>1 THz). In applications such as the drug detection scheme, where detection of narrow-band fingerprint is required, a coherent narrow-band illumination source is crucial. Because of their compact sizes, many THz quantum-cascade lasers with different frequencies, corresponding to different chemical absorption bands, can be packaged tightly, forming a frequency agile coherent radiation source. In combination with a focal-plane imager, such a system can perform frequency-sensitive THz imaging at a rate far greater than the previous methods, allowing real-time THz monitoring and screening.

In this work, real-time, continuous wave (CW) terahertz imaging is demonstrated for the first time using THz QCLs and a focal-plane array camera. The experimental arrangement is shown in Fig. 17. The terahertz QCL is cooled by a cryogen-free pulsed-tube thermomechanical cooler, produces ~50 mW of power at ~30 K. As shown in the figure, imaging experiments in both transmission and reflection mode can be performed. Since the microbolometer camera was initially designed for the 10- μ m wavelength range for night-vision applications, we developed a differential scheme to subtract the strong ambient background at ~300 K and reduce $1/f$ noise.

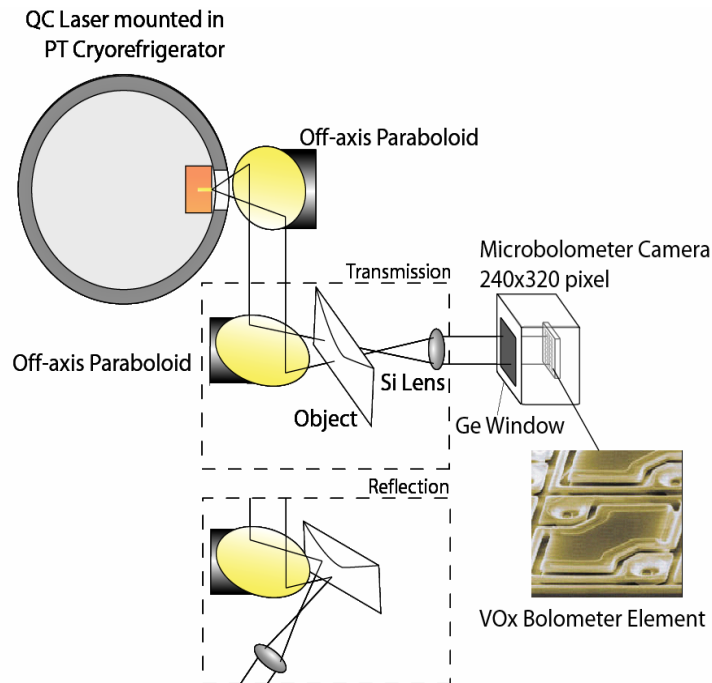


Figure 17. Experimental setup of the THz imaging system. The photo shows a vanadium oxide microbolometer (Courtesy of BAE Systems, Lexington, MA). Cutaway depicts alternate reflection mode setup.

An example of the real-time imaging experiment is shown in Fig. 18, in which several hand-written characters inside a regular mail envelope are clearly visible in THz imaging, in both transmission and reflection mode. It should be pointed out that this particular imaging application cannot be done at other frequencies: x-rays lack contrast; millimeter-waves do not provide sufficient spatial resolution; and infrared radiation is heavily scattered and/or absorbed by fibrous materials. While these still images are recognizable, when they are viewed in real-time the integration of the eye and pattern recognition of the brain aid tremendously as seen in real-time video. With additional QCL's the system will allow analytic, real-time multi-frequency imaging. Very recently, by carefully designing and fabricating QCLs with the desired frequency characteristics, we have demonstrated real-time THz imaging over a stand-off range (>25 meters). Since many substances have unique "spectral fingerprints" at THz frequencies, this long-range real-time imaging capability could have important potentials in military and security applications.

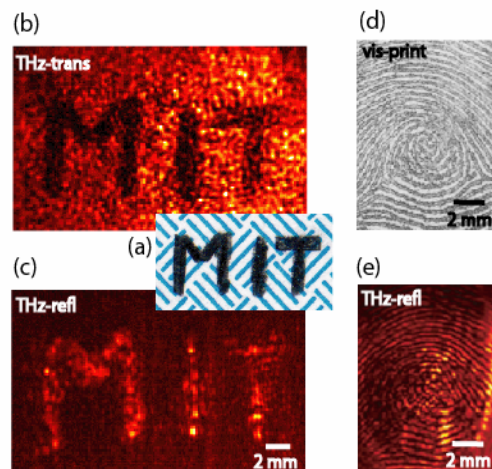


Figure 18. Pencil letters written on the inside of a paper security envelope at visible frequencies (a), in THz transmission mode (b, 1 frame, 1/20 second) and THz reflection mode (c, 20 frames, 1 second). Visible frequency thumb print (d), and THz reflection mode image the thumb of the leading author (e, 20 frames).

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